WHO IS THIS JESUS?
I. GOD INCARNATE @

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"We stone you for no good work but for blasphemy: because you, being a man, make yourself God."

The strange man from Nazareth had just told his crowd of listeners that to them he was like a shepherd: he said "I am the door: if any one enters by me he will be saved." The leading Jews at the temple had had just about enough. This peasant carpenter had gathered quite a following - mostly sinners and riff-raff: he was the subject of many wild rumors and stories: some said he perfor=med miracles and healed the sick. He had made many inflammable statements to his easily inflammable folowing; such as that one about him being the door, and all who eneer by him being saved. That was quite an assertion to make. After all, all good Jews knew that there was only one way to eternal life AND THAT WAS the law and the commandments. This fellow was destroying religion. Some had heard his statements and seen him im action and were saying that he, this illeterate, second class Jew, was God's promised Messiah. This was too much and so the temple Jews fell upon him to stone him. Their rationale was that he had committed the gravest of blasphemy: he was aman but he seemed to be making himseff out to be a God. This was a crime punishable by death in anyone's book.

The ~~strange carpenter's son~~ man eluded them this time, however. Perhaps the crowd was too biased in his favor that day. But the temple Jews knew what they had to do. It was only a matter of time. One day he'd go too far and then he'd get what he had coming to him.. No one, especially in Jerusalem, could go around claiming the things he was claiming an get away with it.

It wasn't long after, that the temple and all of Jerusalem had its day. Jesus returned: right into their midst with his rable-rousing followers: his inflammatory statements: his arrogant presumptiousness, his implications and the tide turned against him. ("Who is this Jesus?") Jerusalem answered loudly and clearly - a fraud, a revolutionary, a pretender to the throne- and worst of all a blasphemer. And so a deal wa made with the Roman authorities whereby society

could be rid of this terrible nuisance. And he was crucified. "Who is this Jesus/?" ? On that day there could be no fence straddling. He was either a fake and a terrible blasphemer; or else he was the eternal son of God. The great majority chose the former: only a few die-hards still claimed he was the Christ; the Messiah of Israel.

The question that presents itself in every chapter, every page, every verse of the New testament is one which must be answered anew by each generation — by each individual. ~~Once a person has heard the story of Jesus Christ he must make a decisionn. He must, in some way, answer the question -"Who is this Jesus?"~~

This morning I begin a series of sermons geared to ask that question again. In the next four weeks I will be dealing with the beleiefs the Christian Church holds forth about this man: the answers we present to the question. And as clearly and bluntly as possible I will be laying before you the picture and story and ideas of a man about whom you must come to some decision. It is not a decision that can be made by a congregatinoal vote; a committee cannoot investigate and report. It is a decision that must come from the heart of each individual; standing absolutley alone.

We are part of what we call the church of Jesus Christ. We have voluntarily taken his name upon ourselves. We have said in effect, that we are ready to live and die by our beliefs about this man. Theoretically, at least, the whole sprawling institution of the church with its millions of members, exists solely because of its answer to the question, "who is this Jesus?" But in our time this is only theoretical. It is possible to become a member of the church, to work in the church, without ever coming to a decision. In fact it is possible to do all this and avoid even confronting the issue. The blame for this must be with the church itself. We claim him as our Lord: we call the church his Body on earth: we call him Lord several times during our servi-e of worship each Sunday. It is our responsibility, and ours alone, to keep him at the center of the church's experience: to keeep thrusting the question "Who is he?" before ourselves: and before the world.

A warning is in order at this point. Having asked the question there is no turning back. As the gospel accounts clearly testify, there is no middle ground. The very nature of the man evokes a response in us - and it is either positive or negative.- there can be no blase detachment. Secondly the question I ask cannot always be answered in words of one syllable. The traditional Christian beliefs about Jesus begin with the doctrine of the incarnation. We believe that Jesus was God incarnate - God in the flesh. That is why we call him Christ. Now to say that a man was God in the flesh is a logical contradiction in terminology. Black is not white: a man is not God. And so as we search our hearts for an answer we must constantly be aware that our minds will take us only so far: that ultimately we must be prepared to proclaim with the apostle: Behold I tell you a mystery."

Standing before a mystery and keeping quiet is not one of mankind's more prevalant capacities. And so men have come up with their own answers about Jesus Christ. Men have worshipped a Christ of their own creating. It is to this that I want to turn: it is interesting to note that what men believe about Jesus, their Christology, directly determines their practice of the faith within the church. And so hopefully we will find ourselves rethinking, not only our beliefs, but also the way we practice them. Hopefully, a periodic confrontation with the question ("Who is this Jesus?") will be a refreshing and renewing experience for us as individuals; and as congregation trying to serve our Lord faithfully in our community.

To illustrate the fact that men do force Jesus Christ into an image of their own liking. I begin with the most radical move in that direction that I know of. You know it has always been difficult for the more anti semetic among the Germans to accept the fact that Jesus Christ was a Jew. And so the theory was forwarded at the turn of the century and happily adopted by the Nazi's, that Jesus wasn't a Jew: he was what everyone had long ~~expected~~ suspected - a good German. His father was a nordic Roman leggionaiire stationed in Palestine: and his affair

with a peasant girl produced a son called Jesus. This, as you see, not only explains away Jesus's Hebrew ancestory- but also conveniently explains the virgin birth as well.

Now not many men go this far: and yet we do force him into a image we prefer. much religious art portrays Jesus as anything but an oriental Jew. The Italian romantics drew Jesus as an Italian. in all the work of the Renaicance, very few artists were willing to honestly attempt to portray his true identity.

Many of you wondered why Salman's head of Christ was removed from the sanctuary. The reasons were many: but chief among them was that Salman has created an Anglicized Christ: a good scotch irishman with wavy brown hair and rosy cheeks. But the Lord of the New testament: my Lord, was a Jew: a Jew in Palestine before the Jews were dispersed throughout the world: a Jew when palestine was the doorway to both Africa and the near East. So Salman's work hangs outside the sanctuary entrance - that you may know that this is a church of Jesus Christ: but that you may not spend one hour a week pondering a work that doesn't come close to portraying the son of a peasant Jewish carpenter.

Our artistic creations of Jesus are not nearly as bad however, as others. This is the age of anxiety, the age of the tranquilizer pill; the age of the atom; the age when God, country and motherhood have sufferred before the the realism of a harsh new cynicism. And so many men seek a sentimental Jesus: A Jesus who is a vestige of the past: a Jesus who symbolizes the security and simplicity of a bygone era. Much of what we teach our children deals with a Jesus who was the friend of little ones; who picked flowers and allowed Mary and Martha to compete for his attention. Then we teach them no more. Many worship a Jesus that Salman has created: Meek, mild, effeminant; a comforting friend to whom we can retire when life becomes to real.

Many people answer the question ("who is this Jesus?") by saying he was a good man. This is the age of reason: it's only healthy that we should deemphasize the mysterious and irrational elements of our faith. After all, does it really

matter if we don't talk too much about this incarnation business? Jesus was just a good man: a very good amn, the best man that ever lived. But don't expect me to believe that he was anything more.

Very close to this is the belief in a moral Jesus. For these persons Jesus was a great teacher of ethics and morals, rannking high among other great teachers such as Cofucious and Aristotle. MoHandus Ghandi, in a famous quote once said: "It would not matter to me if it were proved that Jesus of Nazareth never existed: that the Gospel writers were victims of their own imaginations: the Sermon on the Mount would still be true for me." And millions of people shaking their heads said: "See, isn't it wonderful - Ghandi's a Christian".

This motif runs deep in the modern Christian ethos. I don't have time today to do much more than mention it; but many persons see Christ as a good man; the author of a sound ethic, and then Christianity as a good clean life. Our puritain nativity, our strong individualism, our questionable contribution of Biblical fundamentalism; have all contributed to making the popular image of Christ in this country: a good man, and the Christian faith; a good, law abing life.

For others Jesus is, above all else, a spiritual being. At present this school of thought is not apparent in any one area or grpup of persons: but I would venture the guess than many persons see Jesus as not quite a man: a sort of ethereal, spiritual entitiy. This absolves one of facing the brutality of his death, the reality of his sufferring, and of course the miracle of his resurrection.

Fianally there are some who do know only a philosophical or theological Christ: who deal with Jesus only in abstractions. He has been psychoanalyzed, and called a schizophrenic: it has been said that his super ego completely overshadows his id. He was the perfect example of non dirctive leadership, and so on. This, by the way, is easy and appealing: it allows us to place a personality in

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categories we know and understand; and isolates from a real encounter with the man.

Like all heresies, none of these mistaken Christologies is entirely wrong. But history teaches us that while absolute untruth is rarely accepted by man, he has, with consistency been taken in by half truths. It has been the half truths, the assertions that touch reality and then fly off into untruth that have captivated and enslaved man. No better example can be found than Communism. Karl Marx saw the horrid conditions of 19th century England. He saw women and children laboring 16 hours a day, living in filth and squalor. He saw a handful of men becoming wealthy at the expense of the masses. Marx thought this was wrong - and no one has ever disputed him. But on this small parcel of truth he built a philosophy of materialism and revolution that now has enslaved the minds of millions of men. More than any other movement Communism has capitalized on a half truth: and man's naive willingness to stop thinking before all the truth is known.

In any case all of these answers to the question ("Who is this Jesus") are partly correct: they are all true - up to a point. Jesus was capable of deep sentiment and emotion; he wept; he allowed little children to come to him, in this way he was sentimental. But let us not forget that he was uncompromising also. It was this sentimental Jesus who entered the great temple at Jerusalem and overturned the tables of the money changers. It was gentle Jesus, meek and mild, who looked the pillars of society in the eye and said to them ("woe to you: you're all like white washed tombs, - clean and white on the outside, and full of death and corruption on the inside.")

Jesus was a good man, no doubt the best man that ever lived. But this is not the reason his disciples died for him. The Christian faith grew, not from the memory of a good man who was martyred for his cause, but from the startling assertion of Peter, ("Thou art the Christ - the Son of the livingGod.")

Jesus was a great moral teacher. But his Sermon on the Mount is not particularly unique among the world's ethical teachings. Hundreds of years before Christ, Confucious taught the Golden Rule. His ethical teachings have been retaught and followed by many men who didn't even claim to be Christians.

Jesus was a spiritual being: but let us not forget that his humanity was the same as yours and mine. As he faced his death his humanity cried out - ("if it is possible, may this cup pass from me.") From the cross his commonness with us and with all men expressed itself in the oft repeated phrase ("My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?")

The Christian faith throws us at the feet of this them: a Christ who was sentimental but hard as nails: a man who was God, and God who had become a man: a great teacher of ethics - but one who summed up all his ethical teaching in the command to love. The New Testament, if we take it at all seriously, throws us at the feet of a mystery; the mystery of the incarnation. Its message and the message of the church today is the same: ("God has become man: in this Jesus God had become flesh and lived among men: in this Jesus God has sufferred and died ~~and~~ a very human death: in this Jesus Christ God had defeated death and the grave: and offerred to all men a share in the victory.)

'Who is this Jesus?" ~~I have tried briefly to explain the answer given in the New Testament. Having heard we must decide ; is it our answer?~~ The N.T. answers by portraying a men of great contrasts, a man who doesn't fit into neat categories. And throughout the N.T. writers relentlessly ask their question over and over again to any who have the courage to give it their attention. The question has been asked again today - "Who is this Jesus - Who you do say that he is?"